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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [ICRC](#) [KIRF](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [UZ](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HANFORD MEETS WITH ICRC REPRESENTATIVE

Classified By: POLOFF R. FITZMAURICE FOR REASONS 1.4 (B, D)

¶1. (C) Summary: During a two-day visit to Uzbekistan, Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom John Hanford met on May 30 with International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Deputy Director Raffaello Muller, who reported on prison conditions for individuals convicted of religious extremism and shared his sober analysis of the likelihood of prison reform and how to best achieve progress. On May 29, Hanford also met with government officials to discuss Uzbekistan's Country of Particular Concern (CPC) designation under the International Religious Freedom Act and the contents of a draft confidential letter, delivered by Hanford to the Uzbeks the week before his visit, which lays out steps the government could take to increase religious freedom and have its CPC designation eventually lifted. In addition, on May 30, Hanford met with a variety of religious leaders, scholars, and human rights activists. (Please see septels). End summary.

ICRC PRISON VISITS PROCEEDING ACCORDING TO PLAN

¶2. (C) On May 30, Ambassador Hanford met with International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) Deputy Director Raffaello Muller. In March, the ICRC reached agreement with the Uzbek government to restart prison visits, which had been stalled since December 2004, on the basis of a six-month trial period. Muller noted that a "good dialogue" continued with Uzbek authorities and that the government had so far respected the agreement's modalities, which includes unfettered access to prisons and prisoners. He reported that the ICRC had conducted seven prison visits to date under the interim agreement: three in Tashkent, one in Chirchik, and three in Bukhara province, including one repeat visit. Muller was adamant that if the Uzbeks did not respect their standard operating modalities, ICRC would immediately halt its prison visits in Uzbekistan.

TREATMENT OF RELIGIOUS PRISONERS

13. (C) Hanford explained to Muller that one of the major reasons why Uzbekistan was designated a Country of Particular concern (CPC) were persistent reports that significant numbers of Muslims had been tortured and sentenced to long prison sentences for alleged membership in extremist organizations based often on little more than coerced confessions. Muller acknowledged hearing of such incidents, noting estimates from human rights organizations that Uzbek prisons held 3,000 to 7,000 political prisoners, most of whom were reportedly sentenced on religious extremism charges. However, Muller stressed that he had no way to determine the credibility of such estimates. He was unable to estimate what percentage of the prison population comprised religious prisoners. Muller explained that while the ICRC was responsible for monitoring the welfare of all prisoners, it paid special attention to political prisoners (including religious prisoners), as they were more often exposed to mistreatment.

14. (C) Muller noted that at least according to Uzbek prison regulations, all prisoners have the right to fully practice their religion. During visits to prisons, Muller reported seeing areas inmates could use to pray and copies of the Koran and the Bible in prison libraries. However, he also heard about incidents in which prisoners were punished for violating internal prison regulations by praying at certain times of the day. Muller believed that prison regulations on religious practice were inconsistent, or applied inconsistently. He believed that individuals sentenced on religious extremism charges had less freedom to practice their religion than other inmates. Muller also noted that prison conditions varied considerably across Uzbekistan, and that staff at certain prisons were better trained or more lenient than others.

PRISON VISIT MECHANICS

15. (C) Muller explained that ICRC currently has six prison monitors in Uzbekistan, and that it takes about a week to conduct each prison visit. Upon first arriving at the prison, ICRC asks to see the list of prisoners and archives of the prison. It then interviews a random selection of detainees, spending between 20 minutes and two hours interviewing each of them. ICRC also will specifically request to see certain political prisoners. Before leaving the prison, the ICRC monitors will share their initial assessment of conditions with the prison administration. ICRC attempts to revisit prisons in order to determine whether authorities have made requested improvements and to ensure that prisoners were not punished for talking with ICRC. The organization also periodically shares its findings with higher-level officials. Between 2001 and 2004, Muller said that ICRC managed to visit almost all of Uzbekistan's detention facilities. He noted that there have been some improvements in prison conditions since 2001.

16. (C) Muller emphasized that receiving a comprehensive list of the inmates for each prison was one of ICRC's standard operating modalities and was non-negotiable from their standpoint. Muller said that ICRC could not share the lists with other organizations, as doing so would violate its confidentiality agreement with the government. Muller recognized that the government could still try to hide certain prisoners from the ICRC by transferring them to other locations, but he believed that it would be difficult to hide individuals indefinitely. He pointed to his own experience in Chechnya, where authorities tried but failed to hide certain prisoners from the ICRC, whose existence eventually became known through repeated visits. However, Muller added that authorities in Chechnya eventually constrained the ICRC's access to prisons after they decided the organization knew too much about conditions.

PROSPECTS FOR PRISON REFORM

¶7. (C) Muller believed that most of the human rights violations he observed in Uzbek prisons were the result of two factors: poor training for Uzbek prison guards and policies determined by higher-level Uzbek officials. He noted that the ICRC was able to point out and attempt to correct mistakes made by lower-level prison authorities, but it had much less influence on decisions made at higher levels of government. Muller explained that prison officials and guards themselves were operating under high degrees of stress and suffered from elevated suicide rates. Another major problem Muller noted was that prison officials were generally not punished for committing human rights violations

¶8. (C) Muller was somewhat skeptical about the short-term prospect of improving prison conditions in Uzbekistan. Since the restart of prison visits in March, Muller noted that some things had improved at various prisons, but he did not see systematic improvements. Muller believed that reformers existed within the Uzbek government, including former Deputy Interior Minister and current Deputy General Prosecutor Alisher Sharafutdinov, but noted that they were few and far between. He believed that real change would be generational, observing that the current ruling class still shared a largely Soviet mentality, while the younger generation tended to be more worldly and interested in human rights issues.

MULLER'S VIEWS ON SANCTIONS

¶9. (C) In response to Hanford's question, Muller argued that sanctions were counterproductive in the context of Uzbekistan, observing that EU sanctions against Uzbekistan, first implemented in the wake of the 2005 Andijon events, were largely symbolic and ineffective. He believed that the imposition of EU sanctions blocked, rather than facilitated, dialogue with the Uzbek government on human rights issues, including on restarting ICRC prison visits. Muller explained that Uzbekistan's proud and stubborn officials were afraid of appearing to lose face by caving into the EU's political pressures on human rights. Instead, he noted that it was only after the EU decreased the pressure on Uzbekistan by waiving the sanctions for six months in October 2007 that the ICRC and the government were able to reengage in a serious dialogue on restarting prison visits.

¶10. (C) Rather than the threat of sanctions, Muller believed that the most effective approach for dealing with the Uzbek government on human rights issues was to offer it step-by-step assistance in bringing its law enforcement and judicial systems up to international standards. Muller believed that Uzbek officials were more receptive to offers of assistance than threats of sanctions.

COMMENT

¶11. (C) What Muller told us about conditions improving for religious prisoners at some prisons, but not at others, tracks generally with what we have heard from human rights activists. We also agree with Muller's assessment that offers of assistance, rather than threats of sanctions, are likely to spur further human rights and religious freedom improvements.

BUTCHER